



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

## 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 1988

ARCHIVED ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 01/01/1988

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## **AUSTRALIANS AT WAR**

This article has been contributed by the Australian War Memorial - written by Matthew Higgins.

Over 100,000 Australians have lost their lives through war. Many more thousands have been wounded, while the number of Australians who have served abroad in wartime is eight to nine times the number who have died.

These bare statistics alone show the significance that war has had for Australia. Australia's history is different from that of many other nations in that since the first coming of the Europeans and their dispossession of the Aborigines, Australia has not experienced a subsequent invasion; no war has since been fought on Australian soil. Yet Australians have fought in ten wars. Some of these have been in distant lands, others much closer to home. All of them were begun by other nations and involved Australia because of its overseas ties; alliances formed through sentiment, loyalty or simply for reasons of security. Paramount among these ties have been those with Great Britain and, more recently, the United States.

At times war has brought Australian society together. Remarkable displays of patriotic fervour have been created in wartime, as witnessed at the outbreak of World War I. But war has also turned Australian society against itself. During the conscription referenda campaigns of World War I and the moratorium street marches of the Vietnam years (caused, in part, by the conscription issue) the nation experienced great social tension.

War began to have an impact on Australia and Australian society during the later 1800s. Australia's participation in several small imperial wars during the second half of the nineteenth century allowed the colonies to demonstrate their loyalty to Britain and helped to strengthen imperial ties. These overseas involvements also encouraged the colonies to believe that they could occupy a larger place on the international stage.

World War 1, though, had a much greater impact on Australian society. Anzac Day, commemorating the landing of Australian and New Zealand troops on the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25 April 1915, is Australia's most important commemorative day. The Anzac legend, representing the Australian fighting man as a resourceful, resilient, even cheerful warrior, has become part of Australia's folklore. It has been an accepted part of the culture for two generations of Australians. More recently it has been questioned increasingly.

That same Anzac landing really heralded Australia's entry into the First World War, a war that took nearly 60,000 Australian lives. The tremendous cost of the War (Australia's casualty rate, in proportion to the number of troops engaged, was higher than for any other country in the British

Empire) left an indelible scar on the nation. Perhaps the most tangible sign of this was the number of memorials, still standing today, built in cities and towns around the country after the end of hostilities. The Australian War Memorial was inspired by that War.

World War 1, for the first time in white Australia's history, placed the country under the very threat of invasion. Australia's total resources were called upon to a degree not seen before. Women increasingly filled the places in primary and secondary industry left by men. By the end of the War in 1918, the place of women in society had changed dramatically. The War also fundamentally altered Australia's relationship with Britain, for it had forced Australia to look away from Britain and towards the United States for support and security.

The Asian wars that followed, in Korea, Malaya, Malaysia and Vietnam, have all helped to change further Australia's outlook on the world. Well before 1972, when the last Australians left Vietnam, Australia had begun to see itself not merely as a part of the European world but, realistically, as a neighbour of South-East Asia. Involvement in these conflicts has strengthened Australia's relationship with the United States.

Australia's military history began with the several companies of Marines of the Royal Navy which landed with the first fleet in 1788. From 1790 until 1870 the colonies' defence forces consisted mainly of a succession of British regiments which garrisoned remote fortifications, guarded convicts, fought Aborigines and played a notable role in Australia's development. During the 1850s, the six colonies began raising their own forces. Towards the end of the century these grew rapidly,

Australian soldiers took part in a number of overseas campaigns during the colonial period. Some 2,500 volunteers from New South Wales and Victoria went to New Zealand in 1863 to fight in the Waikato regiments against the Maoris. In 1885, 750 New South Wales troops went to the Sudan to assist British forces in quelling rebellion. Because the men of the Waikato regiments had joined a New Zealand force, the Sudan contingent (though it saw little action) is regarded as Australia's first official expeditionary force. Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia also sent naval contingents to China during the Boxer rebellion, 1900-01.

From European settlement in 1788 until after Federation in 1901, Australia's strategic naval defence was provided by ships of the Royal Navy, Colonial naval forces for local defence were also established. In 1860 the Victorian government dispatched the corvette, HMVS **Victoria**, to serve in New Zealand during the Anglo-Maori wars. The South Australian cruiser, **Protector**, served off China during the Boxer rebellion.

When the Australian colonies achieved Federation in January 1901 they had been involved in a war in South Africa for more than a year. In October 1899 the Boer War had broken out between the British and the mainly Dutch farmers (Boers) of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The Australian colonies and (after Federation) the Commonwealth sent contingents totalling 16,175 men to serve with the British army. The war was one of movement in which the Australian, fighting as mounted infantry, played a key role. By the time a peace treaty was signed in 1902, they had suffered over 1,900 casualties; of these 518 had died, most from disease.

## World War I

By 1914, Europe had become increasingly unstable, When the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire was assassinated in June. an intricate system of alliances led the major European States into war, On 4 August Britain and Germany went to war. As a member of the British empire, Australia was automatically committed. Australians entered the War with enthusiasm, out of a sense of adventure or a sense of loyalty to Britain, or both. Australian leaders promised support right up to 'the last man and the last shilling', and Britain was offered a force of 20,000 men - the Australian Imperial Force (AIF).

The first Australian force to take part in the War was the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary

Force. By December 1914, the AN & MEF had seized German wireless stations in New Guinea and nearby islands, though not without suffering five men killed and four wounded - the first Australian battle casualties of the War.

The 1st Division of the AIF sailed from Australia in November 1914. During the voyage, HMAS **Sydney** destroyed the German raider, SMS **Emden**, off the Cocos Islands. During five months' training in Egypt, the men of the 1st Division, together with New Zealand troops, came to be known as the Anzacs (the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps).

On 25 April 1915 the Anzacs landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula and began an eight-month campaign against Turkish forces. Despite their determination, the Australians and New Zealanders failed to achieve their objectives. The campaign developed into a stalemate in which neither the Anzacs nor the British and French troops on other parts of the Peninsula made substantial advances. Conditions were appalling and disease took a greater toll than fighting. Finally, on 20 December 1915, the last Australians were evacuated. During the campaign Australia suffered 8,700 dead, 19,000 wounded and 700 missing.

After Gallipoli, the main body of the AIF went to France to fight on the Western Front against the Germans. Between July and September 1916 the Australians fought in the first battle of the Somme and experienced some of the bloodiest fighting of the war, sustaining immense casualties. The battle for the village of Pozieres was the major Australian action during the Somme fighting and extraordinarily intense German shellfire turned it into a living hell. After the War, official historian C. E. W. Bean wrote that Pozieres ridge was 'a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'.

Following the fighting for Bullecourt in April-May 1917, the Australian infantry attacked strong German defences around Ypres in Belgium, fighting in terrible mud amid heavy artillery and gas barrages. Messines Ridge, Menin Road and Broodseinde were taken but it proved impossible to advance beyond Passchendaele before winter. Australian casualties in this fighting totalled 38,000.

Meanwhile, the Australian Light Horse had been fighting the Turks in the deserts of Sinai and Palestine. Lighthorsemen helped defend the Suez Canal against Turkish forces in 1916 before advancing across the Sinai desert. During 1917 they fought with British forces to drive the Turks out of their defences between Gaza and Beersheba. This advance included a dramatic charge at Beersheba on 31 October. By December, Jerusalem had been captured.

On the Western Front, spring 1918 saw a German offensive break through allied lines on the Somme. An Australian counter-attack at Villers-Betonneux began a series of reverses for the Germans and by July much ground had been regained. On 8 August, the long-awaited allied offensive began and the Australians played a major role in the drive to the Hindenburg line. Germany agreed to an armistice and, after four years of terrible fighting and horrific casualties, the War ended on 11 November 1918. In Palestine, the Turks had signed an armistice nearly two weeks before, following the capture of Damascus by allied forces.

The Australian Flying Corps provided four squadrons in the air war; one served in the Middle East and three others on the Western Front. Australians also flew with the British Royal Flying Corps. Australian naval forces served in a number of theatres during the War. They patrolled the North Sea, the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Netherlands East Indies and the Mediterranean.

Though a considerable distance from the fighting, Australians at home felt the impact of the War. New demands were made on the Australian economy. New industries had had to be developed. The cost of defence meant heavy borrowing and new taxes. Strikes broke out in 1915 and recurred throughout the War.

The enormous casualties incurred by the AIF on the Somme in 1916 raised the issue of conscription being used to maintain levels of reinforcements. It soon opened up the divisions in society that the

war had been creating since 1914, but which had remained beneath the surface. Forced to put the issue to a referendum, the Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, led the campaign for a 'yes' vote. The referendum was lost narrowly and Hughes, because of his role in the 'yes' campaign, was expelled from the Labor Party which was against conscription. Hughes took a number of followers with him, and with his previous political opponents formed the National Party. The new party was elected with a landslide majority in May 1917. A second referendum in December 1917 rejected conscription by a larger majority. The campaign was shorter than the first, although the bitterness on both sides had increased. The degree of tension created by these referenda had rarely been seen before in Australian history.

Australia had lost nearly 60,000 servicemen during the War. One in five of those who went overseas failed to return.

## World War II

Despite its formation following World War I, the League Of Nations did not avert future conflicts. The rise of Nazism in Germany (which partly resulted from the peace treaty signed in 1919) and Fascism in Italy led to a series of international crises in the 1930s. Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, and Britain and France declared war on Germany two days later. Australia was again at war.

Australian troops embarked for the Middle East early in 1940. In December they joined in the Allied campaign against the Italians in Cyrenaica which culminated in the capture of Benghazi in February 1941. The German **Afrika Korps** then landed at Tripoli and pushed back the Allies. Australian, British Commonwealth and Polish troops were besieged in Tobruk by the Germans and Italians until relieved in December. The campaign rolled across North Africa several times. In October 1942 the Australians played a significant part in the battle of El Alamein, in which the Germans and Italians were decisively defeated and forced to retreat from the North African theatre.

After playing a prominent part in the North Africa in early 1941, the 6th Australian Division was sent with New Zealand and British troops to halt a threatened German invasion of Greece. Overwhelmed by the Germans, the force fought a rearguard action before being withdrawn to Crete and Egypt. Crete was evacuated following a German airborne assault in May 1941.

Australians joined British and Indian troops in June to attack the Vichy French in Syria. The invasion thrust north from Palestine with naval support along the coast and, after a five-week campaign, the Vichy forces concluded an armistice.

Japan entered the War on 7 December 1941. Despite their determined efforts, Australians and Allied forces in Malaya and Singapore, and smaller garrisons on Java, Timor, Ambon and New Britain were overwhelmed during the next few months. The survivors began a three-and-a-half year ordeal in captivity. Australia itself was attacked four days after the surrender of Singapore, when Japanese aircraft bombed Darwin on 19 February 1942. Broome and other north-west coastal towns; were also attacked in subsequent raids. Japanese midget submarines raided Sydney Harbour during the night of 31 May.

Combined Australian and American efforts, however, prevented large-scale attacks on the Australian mainland. Japan suffered significant defeats in the battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 and in the battle of Midway a month later. In August at Milne Bay in Papua, the Australians dealt the Japanese their first defeat on land. The bitter Kokoda campaign, fought by Australians in the humid, malarial jungle and rugged mountains of New Guinea, halted the Japanese advance on Port Moresby. By early 1943 Australian and American forces had pushed the Japanese out of Papua. Allied forces progressively retook New Guinea and adjacent islands during 1943 and 1944. By 1945, Australian troops had almost cleared New Guinea of the Japanese and had landed in Borneo. American forces were poised to invade Japan by mid-1945. On 6 and 9 August, atomic bombs were

dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing nearly 100,000 people. Japan surrendered shortly after.

The Royal Australian Navy played an important and diverse role during the War. From 1939 to 1941 Australian ships served with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. In July 1940, HMAS **Sydney** sank the Italian cruiser, **Bartolomeo Colleoni**, off Crete but was itself sunk by the German raider, **Kormoran**, off Western Australia in November 1941.

Following Japan's entry into the War, Australian naval operations were confined mainly to the Pacific Ocean and the seas to the north of Australia. RAN vessels co-operated closely with United States' ships in a range of engagements in support of Allied advances in the south-west Pacific theatre.

Air fighting played a much more significant role during World War II than it had in World War I. During 1939 to 1945, the RAAF co-operated closely with its British counterpart, particularly in the Mediterranean, North African and Malayan theatres. Australian aircrew served with the Royal Air Force in the bomber offensive against Germany and in the invasions of Europe.

Closer to Australia, the RAAF repelled Japanese fighters over Darwin and Port Moresby in 1942 and fought over the Bismarck Sea in 1943. Coastal surveillance, mine-laying and anti-submarine patrols were undertaken by RAAF squadrons. Transport and fighter-bomber squadrons supported ground assault, against the Japanese in Papua, New Guinea and adjacent islands. The RAAF often co-operated with American air formations in the War against the Japanese.

The War created complex administrative, military, economic and industrial burdens for Australia. Of the total population of 7,000,000 Australians, nearly 500,000 were engaged in munitions, or building roads or airfields, and over 1,000,000 joined the armed services. Industry, commerce and the labour market were regulated, prices and rents were fixed and food, petrol and clothing were rationed.

Australian women played a major role during World War II. They served in the three services and formed a large component of the labour force, releasing men for active service from munitions, ship-building and aircraft works, factories, farms, commerce, transport and communications.

After Japan entered the War, Australia depended increasingly on the United States for military support. General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Melbourne in March 1942 to lead Australian-American efforts. During the following two years, thousands of American service-men were quartered in Australia, primarily for training before operations in the south-west Pacific area. Their presence had a considerable impact on Australian society, while at the same time the alliance with the United States was affecting Australia's long-term foreign policy.

Australia lost 34,000 service personnel during World War II. Total battle casualties were 72,814. Over 31,000 Australian became prisoners-of-war. Of these more than 22,000 were captured by the Japanese; by August 1945 over one third of them had died in the appalling conditions of the prisoner-of-war camps.

## **Wars in Asia**

Not long after the end of World War II, the Cold War between Communist and Western nations intensified. During the 1950s and 1960s, Australia's concern about the growth of communism- particularly in Asia - saw the nation's foreign policy and defence commitments become much more closely oriented to that part of the globe, while at the same time it sought a still stronger alliance with the United States.

Communist North Korea invaded South Korea on 25 June 1950. The United Nations (UN) called for assistance to repel the aggressors. Australian air, sea and ground forces were dispatched and fought alongside other UN forces, always ultimately under American command. Australian soldiers fought in a number of bitterly contested actions, including Kapyong and Maryang San, and mounted

numerous patrols and raids during the static war which developed from late 1951 to July 1953 while armistice negotiations dragged on. Australian airmen made a major contribution to the UN effort, flying a wide range of missions throughout the conflict. The RAN was represented by nine vessels, including the aircraft carrier HMAS **Sydney**. On 27 July 1953 an armistice was finally signed. The Australian services suffered 339 dead and 1,216 wounded: 29 servicemen became prisoners-of-war. During the war Australia, the United States and New Zealand signed the ANZUS treaty.

Two years before Australian forces embarked for Korea, fighting had broken out in Malaya between communist insurgents and British authorities. In 1950 Australia provided bomber and transport squadrons and army advisers. Combat troops were sent in 1955 and several RAN ships also undertook operations against the insurgents. Thirty-six Australians died during the Malayan emergency, which ended in 1960.

Three years later Australians were involved in another nearby conflict, Indonesia's 'confrontation' of Malaysia. Indonesia, opposing the formation of this new nation (consisting of Malaya, Singapore - which later withdrew - Sarawak and Sabah), started sending guerilla forces into Malaysia in 1963. During 1964 to 1966 Australian troops helped to defeat the guerillas in Sarawak and Sabah, while the RAN and RAAF helped defend the Malayan mainland against direct infiltration. Seventeen Australians died during the confrontation.

By the time the confrontation finished, Australian combat troops had been fighting in Vietnam for over a year. Following the end of French colonial rule in 1954, Vietnam had been divided, with a communist government in the north and a non-communist government in the south. Fighting broke out between communist guerillas and the southern regime during the late 1950s. By 1962 the United States was supplying substantial military support for the southern government. and in July Australia sent the first of its military advisers.

In 1965 Australia committed a battalion of troops to the conflict, and in 1966 an Australian task force of two (later three) battalions with supporting arms was provided. Australian troops fought mainly in Phuoc Tuy province against the Viet Cong (the guerillas of the communist National liberation Front) and also against North Vietnamese forces outside the province. The RAAF flew transport aircraft, bombers and helicopters in Vietnam. Guided missile destroyers and specialist teams were provided by the RAN. More than 50,000 Australians served in Vietnam, making it Australia's biggest military commitment since World War II.

As involvement in Vietnam continued, opposition at home mounted. Growing numbers of Australians believed Australia should not be fighting in Vietnam; many were angered by the use of conscripts in the war. Opposition culminated in the nationally co-ordinated moratorium street marches of 1970-71. A bitter divisiveness permeated Australian society, reminiscent of the referenda campaigns of 1916-17.

Australian forces had withdrawn from Vietnam by late 1972. A total of 496 Australian had died and 2,398 were wounded during the war. Repercussions of the war, and Australia's involvement in it, are still being felt as Vietnamese refugees settle into Australian society and as the controversy over the effects on veterans of defoliants used in the war continues.

Australians have fought in ten wars on many different battlefields around the world. These involvements have left their mark on Australian society, causing great human cost yet helping to shape an Australian identity and Australia's relations with the rest of the world.

## AUSTRALIAN WAR CASUALTIES

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	Duration	Numbers enlisted or engaged	Deaths	Wounded	Prisoners- of-war
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<b>New Zealand</b>	1860-61 (official Australian involvement)	Crew of HMVS <i>Victoria</i> served 1860-61 (several thousand Australians enlisted in the New Zealand Waikato regiments 1863-69)	Accurate figures not available	Accurate figures not available	Accurate figures not available
<b>Sudan</b>	1885	770 men joined the New South Wales contingent to the Sudan	9 died from all causes	3	-
<b>South Africa</b>	1899-1902	16,000 Australians joined colonial and Commonwealth contingents to serve in South Africa	251 killed in action or died of wounds, 267 died of illness, total 518 dead	538	100
<b>Boxer rebellion</b>	1900-01	560 men, from New south Wales, South Australia and Victoria served in colonial naval contingents	6 died from all causes	Accurate figures not available	-
<b>First World War</b>	1914-18	417,000 men enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (including Australian Fyling Corps) 330,000 served overseas (no figures for the Royal Australian Navy)	60,000 from all causes (AIF only)	155,000 (AIF only)	4,044 (397 died while captive)

<b>Second World War</b>	1939-45	691,000 men and 35,800 women enlisted in the Australian Military forces (AIF and Militia), 45,000 men and 3,100 women enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy, 189,000 men and 27,000 women enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force	35,000 deaths from all causes (all services)	66,553 (all services)	7,289 in the war against Germany (of whom 234 died while captive), 22,376 in the war against Japan (of whom 8,031 died while captive)
<b>Korean war</b>	1950-53	10,657 army personnel engaged, 4,507 navy personnel engaged (no figures for air force)	339 deaths from all causes (all services)	1,216 (all services)	29 (1 died while captive)
<b>Malayan emergency</b>	1950-60	7,000 army personnel engaged (no figures for other services)	36 deaths from all causes (all services)	20	-
<b>Indonesian confrontation</b>	1963-66	3,500 army personnel (no figures for other services)	15 deaths from all causes (all services)	9	-
<b>Vietnam war</b>	1962-72	42,700 army personnel engaged, 2,858 navy personnel engaged, 4,443 air force personnel engaged	496 deaths from all causes (all services)	2,398 (all services)	

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Note: Casualty figures differ between sources due to variations in recording methods, criteria for classification etc; the figures for deaths, wounded and prisoners-of-war should therefore be regarded as approximate only.



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This page last updated 22 November 2012

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